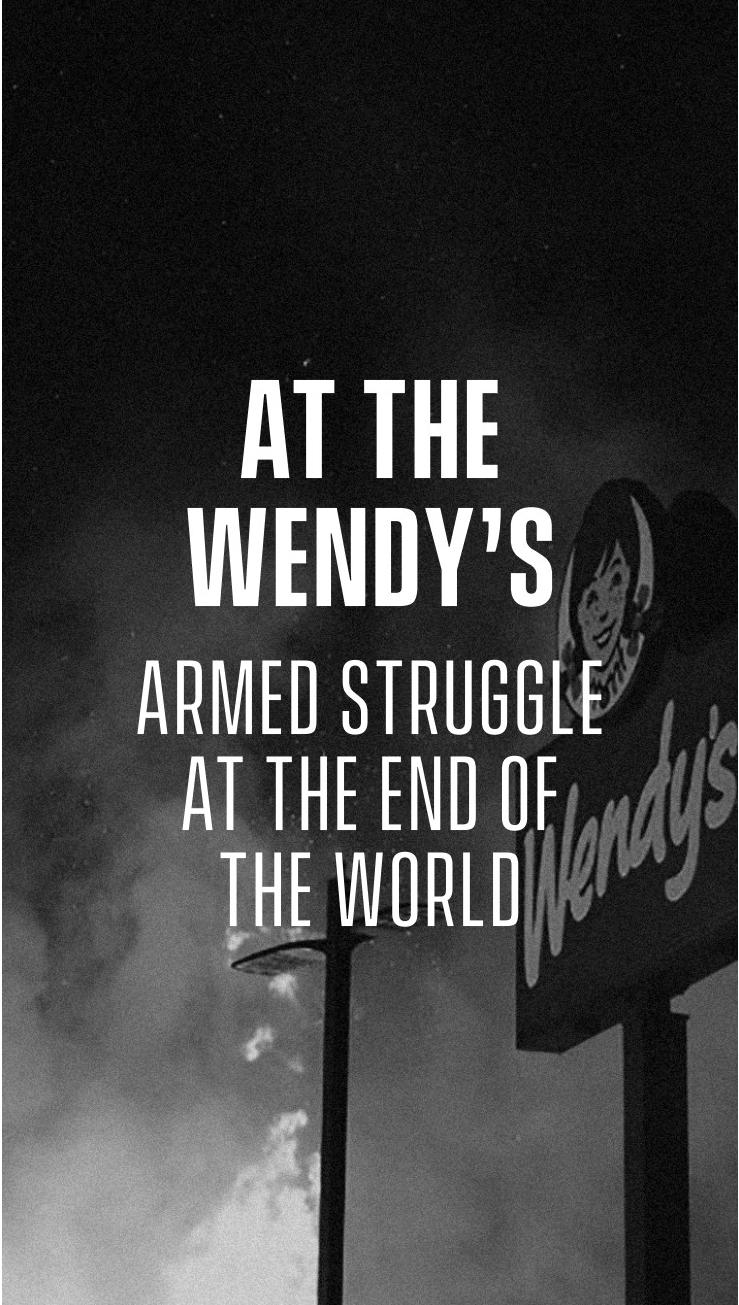


AT THE
WENDY'S
ARMED STRUGGLE
AT THE END OF
THE WORLD



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Cover photo: Wendy's burning in Atlanta, June 13 2020.

For Rayshard Brooks, for Natalie White, for Secoriae Turner.

June 12th. It was just before midnight on a Friday night when we got the news. I was sitting out front of a house with everybody else at a party. Most of us were fucked up—intoxicated by a mixture of adrenaline from 17 days straight of rioting, a months' long supply of looted liquor, MDMA, everything else you could put in your body to help it shed its old skin and take on new shapes in the collective body of the revolt. The carnivalesque atmosphere deflates instantly.

Someone came out of the house in distress. “The police just shot a man at the Wendy’s. B [a close friend of hers] saw the whole thing. He was in the parking lot filming and is being held as a witness.” A shot of panic dulled the mood. We all knew what happened to the person who filmed Alton Sterling’s murder, just like what happened to the person who filmed Eric Garner’s murder. We had to get him out of there quick. Wendy’s?! At University and Pryor? The building was right down the street.

Eventually we decided to head to the scene. A small but angry crowd facing off with a police line. The crowd was mostly Black, reflecting the neighborhood where the killing took place. People screamed at the cops and the Black District Attorney who came out to calm people down. No one was having it. They talked among themselves about what had happened, made no secret of the guns they were carrying, and held the streets until late. We exchanged glances with comrades in the crowd and residents. It was too early to tell what would happen, too late in the night to expect a crowd to form.

We struggle to think of the George Floyd rebellion as a single movement, and even to make transregional claims about its political content. We can only speak of the events that unfolded in different places—we speak of Kenosha, of Portland, the CHAZ, Minneapolis, Chicago, NYC, Los Angeles, Richmond, Atlanta, each with its own dynamics. What the rebellion has made clear is that we are living through the ongoing and uneven fragmentation of the United States of America as we know it.

I have spent the last 10 years trying to imagine what something like the George Floyd rebellion would look like—debating what would set it off, how people would fight, what stores they would loot, how it would all be coordinated. Never in my wildest imagination could I have pictured this.

On the day the Wendy's burnt down, alien peace police were left to shout through their bullhorns at a local crowd that ignored and moved past them without the slightest regard. Attempts to organize the crowd along racial lines—“White people to the front!” and so on—were almost entirely ineffective. While a few people were duped into standing on the highway to mimic the effects of traffic, down on the road below, the bulk of the crowd was able to collaborate and coordinate ballistics and weapons across racial lines. The myth of the “outside agitator” sounded like a sick joke in the ears of everyone on the ground.¹

The first days of the occupation were a free for all. Every night, teenagers came out to block the roads with flamethrowers, guns, swords, and cars. Sideshows took over adjacent intersections and by nightfall caravans had formed to loot the rich parts of the city. The occupation of space wasn't limited to the parking lot. It was porous and diffuse, mobile rather than fortified.

We showed up at the Wendy's almost every single day, enjoying the distinctly

anti-political feel of the space. But as time went on, we were unsure as to the endgame of the occupation. We had been busy building infrastructure and forming alliances with some of the security team, but hadn't had much conversation with anyone about what would happen next.

Fast forward a couple weeks. On June 29th, a comrade sent us a message over text from the Wendy's leadership, addressed "To whom it may concern." The authors of the message called the occupation a "private protest" before going on to say that "We have a detailed plan, and we do not want our wants to be confused with other community wants." This was the first we had heard of a "detailed plan." They continued: "As of now we have broken no laws." They "want[ed] community politicians to sit down with us" to organize the construction of a Peace Center and a national monument, among other things. The rest of the letter listed demands for police abolition. We had to laugh at the idea of calling it a "private protest," and especially at the part where they said "we have broken no laws." Somebody had to burn that building down, and that sure as hell wasn't legal. Plenty of people are facing charges for that. The self-appointed leadership clearly hadn't been there from the beginning. They had no more right to ownership over the space than anyone else. This was the first time we had heard that anyone wanted to transform the Wendy's into a "Peace Center." It was unclear to us exactly how that was supposed to happen. Just sit in the parking lot long enough with guns, and the city will give it to you? Only once the strategy was announced did we realize the utter absence of a strategy.

On (militant) Black leadership

The group that built a permanent occupation at the Wendy's was not in any way affiliated with official Black Lives Matter or any other pre-existing activist group, and for this reason we cannot describe it as a political leadership in a traditional sense. The occupation's atmosphere was remarkable in its absence of leftist or activist roles such as people proselytizing, giving orders through megaphones, general assemblies, or making attempts to "organize" others. While a visible and traditional activist leadership was nowhere to be seen, what emerged instead fit more along the lines of a silent and informal leadership.

The roles at the Wendy's can be understood through three clearly defined categories: a council of leaders, a gang leadership element, and a

security team made up of largely younger men whose role was to guard the entrance to the parking lot of the Wendy's, do nightly patrols to watch for signs of police raids, and from time to time block the roads and control traffic. Overall, the leadership presented many obstacles to unleashing the full potential of the occupation, making it more of a cop-free zone than an autonomous zone

Contemporary movements are constitutively leaderless. This is not a moral choice—a decision to oppose any command issued from on-high—but a condition of our epoch. As the We Still Outside Collective recently wrote, “What they call ‘the Black leadership’ *does not exist.*” This is to say neither that nobody takes initiative, nor that no one tells people what to do. Far from it. The point, again, is epochal. In the 60’s, there was NAACP, SNCC, Revolutionary Action Movement, the Black Panthers, Weather Underground, SDS, BLA with their concomitant figures—Martin Luther King Jr., Huey Newton, Assata Shakur. Who are these figures today? If there are plenty of martyrs from the struggles of the past several years, there are no leaders. Even if some chapters of the formal Black Lives Matter organization have survived the previous BLM cycle, they have largely played a pacifying role in the current uprising, advocated for reforms, or at best have been reduced to voicing support for more militant actions which they had nothing to do with. Black Lives Matter survives not as an organization but as a meme, that is to say, a slogan at best. When leaders do emerge, they are unlikely to have any impactful engagement with the struggle—leaders today only lead struggles one place: to their end.

The leadership of the Wendy's chose the goal of creating the Rayshard Brooks Peace Center, which was intended as a place to set up services of care and healing for Black people. This goal seemed appropriate for the situation and even potentially achievable, and as an idea it won the support of many participants at the occupation.

But the strategy was confused in that it attempted to combine elements from a confrontational and militant occupation with the ultimate goal of having a chat with city politicians. In this way, the conflict over the occupation’s outcome has an unsuspected analogy to the conflict over the ZAD. Would it be better to maintain a militant space that refused to negotiate with the city, but which would ultimately be crushed militarily? Or did

it make more sense to engage in negotiations to make more permanent victories which, while potentially recuperative, might have ultimately empowered those involved? (On this note, it is interesting that recent reports from Portland have tried to call the same dichotomy of “pressure politics versus direct action” into question.)

The problem of leadership at the Wendy’s exceeded traditional critiques of movement leadership. Such critiques tend to focus on actors who attempt to circumscribe the limits of action to largely symbolic gestures, while neutralizing or denouncing any forces that attempt to exceed this framework. In the text “On Black Leadership and other White Myths,” for example, the particular problem attributed to the Black leadership is its pacifying attempt to stifle unmediated Black rage in a bid to appeal to the white imaginary. While such a critique captures the problem of Black leaders like Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, this narrative doesn’t effectively describe what happened at the Wendy’s. Specifically, while the leadership there dictated what forms of action were and were not legitimate, they did not pacify the movement, nor did they make any attempts to present a more palatable version of Black rage that would gain widespread symbolic support from white civil society. Instead, the opaque leadership accelerated a militant stance towards conflict to a point which, as I will describe below, contributed to occupation’s eventual downfall. The problem of leadership combined with the armed nature of the occupation consolidated power in a manner that overdetermined the rest of the situation.

From a pragmatic perspective, the main obstacle presented by these more militant attempts at leadership is that our organizational systems were incompatible, which prevented communication between them almost entirely. It was almost impossible for a group operating with a closed leadership and a clear sense of internal constitution to interact and engage with chaotic, leaderless swarms. The hierarchical form of command of the pseudo-leaders at the Wendy’s occupation could not interact with those accustomed to operating on principles of autonomy. With regard to its own organizational system, the leadership at Wendy’s had a clear sense of who was who, and as a result it was able to clearly distribute tasks and delineate a structure of command within its own ranks. But this model of organization belongs to a bygone era, in which participants of a movement

might seek coherence by forcing everything into alignment or expecting ideology or identity to provide a practical unity.

In contemporary insurrections, this hierarchical structure of command and its concomitant drive toward unity is being replaced by a form of immanent collective intelligence. Gestures and communication spread across an increasingly fragmented *socius* without consolidating any coherent organizational body or identity. Actions and tactics, shared on Telegram or social media and *detoured* to fit the needs of specific locales, spread in a memetic fashion. Our organizational task therefore has more to do with mediating differences than with overcoming separation. Facing the organizational problem with an understanding of fragmentation as a condition, rather than a shortcoming, will be crucial to allowing our movements to flourish—rather than decay—under the mark of leaderlessness.

It's Juneteenth, the mood is vibrant, we're in the middle of a revolution. We're on a porch getting high again, 7 or 8 of us in full gear, about to head down to the Wendy's for the night. All of the sudden we hear gunshots. Now, this is Lakewood Heights, people shoot guns off every night in this neighborhood. But I've never heard anything like this in my life. In total, over 100 rounds were fired off. The gunfire continued on and off for about 30 minutes. We get the news that someone we know got hit by a ricocheted bullet. They tourniquetted their own leg and sat there calmly, waiting to be driven off. Luckily, they make it out without any severe injuries. Later we learn that the initial gunfire came from white people who drove up and opened fire on the Wendy's.

Juneteenth marks the first day that we weren't at the Wendy's. We take a breather the next day as well, and gear up to do a big barbecue on the day after. It seems that people don't really know what's going on at the Wendy's, so we try to open it up to the community, and try to attract some new people to the space. We need the space to grow. We need more people to come with their own initiatives and help build the space up.

We put out a call for donations and receive plenty of funding. We prepare an exorbitant feast. I'm not talking about hot dogs, but several different kinds of meat and fish, and a giant pot of chili. We spend the better part of a day preparing. We take 2 cars down to the Wendy's around 1 in the afternoon. The first car gets in fine with the barbecue in the back. I'm in the second car, we roll up and try to enter

the parking lot, car packed full of food. We're greeted by a strange man holding a laminated sheet of paper when we approach the driveway. We crack the window and he says, "Have you been to the Peace Center before?" "Sir, this is a Wendy's," I didn't say. Rather, "I've been here every day and I've never seen you here, who are you?" The man gets heated, tells us we need to pull over and listen to his speech before entering. We ignore him and signal to some of the people we knew from days prior, and try to get our comrades to come help us out. The man grows impatient and starts yelling "PULL AWAY MOVE TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROAD." At this point things really get tense. All of a sudden our car is surrounded by people with guns. At this point, we comply. The car turns around, and we're stuck up through the window as we drive the car across the street. Well, now it's a bit stressful. We get escorted across the street, where we park. Our car is still surrounded. "Y'all got any bombs in this car, IEDs," someone says to us, I'm like "no, I've been here every day, you've seen us here. We came to cook for y'all and the car is full of food." They search the car; I hide the knife I brought to cut food under my seat as discreetly as possible. Back in the Wendy's parking lot, deliberations are underway. We chain smoke cigarettes to pass what feels like an eternity. Our friends are still behind the armed checkpoint. All we can do is wait. Finally, we get through to them that we're there to grill. An older dude comes up to us: "I know that you all are here to do good things for us. But do not do harm to this community. I promise you, if you do harm to this community, we have snipers on you, there's over 50 guns in that parking lot right now. If you misstep, you won't make it out alive." We assure them we mean no harm and then we receive an armed caravan back across the road. One of the members of the security team tells us, "It's good that you're out here with us. Everybody who's not with us is gonna die."

Once we reach the opposite shore of the Wendy's parking lot, we begin to unload. Shortly thereafter, a disagreement ensues in the parking lot, and then finally someone comes up and tells us to get the hell out before we get chased out, at which point we head out and set up around the corner, and deliver trays of food to the space from afar.

The shooting on Juneteenth turned the unbounded protest into a defined and limited occupation, and white people were temporarily banned from the space. It made sense for them to tighten up security after a shooting, but the ultimate result of this was a sharp increase of militarization of the space combined with a suspicion of everyone that hadn't been there before. As time went on, visitors were told they could

come observe the monument to Rayshard, but that after paying their respects they would have to leave. At its worst, anyone who wanted to stay longer would have to sign in with the security, report which tasks they wanted to complete, how long they expected to be there, and get out after they had finished what they came to do. In a notable instance, a young kid who had volunteered to set up a media strategy for the occupation was permanently banned for cutting a hole in the fence of the parking lot into the neighboring lot, a giant open space filled with plenty of barricade materials and plenty of hiding spaces, as well as a hidden exit. It was no longer a space to vibe as it had been in the early days, and certainly no longer a place for experimentation.

Paranoia and fatalism

Paranoia and the proliferation of conspiracy theories are an integral part of our contemporary political atmosphere. If police and politicians cannot repress a movement beforehand or in the moment, they are likely to try to divide it after the fact by seeding mistrust among actors by attributing malicious intentions to those responsible. The police in Minneapolis have pursued this strategy, attempting time and time again to pin the most significant acts of the revolt on “white supremacists.”

Participants at Wendy’s were not immune to these kinds of conspiracy theories. Thus, at one point, people agreed that the shooters attacking the camp on July 5th were “Russians” sent in to derail the movement. For much of the time, many people thought we were outside agitators as well. It is to be expected that Black people distrust the intentions of a group with several white people who came to the Wendy’s. We don’t expect this mistrust to be overcome immediately. But as the leadership became more and more paranoid, it became increasingly difficult for our group to do anything. Thus, the food we brought to the occupation in an attempt to add a reproductive element to the struggle was deemed “poisoned” and not to be eaten. In another instance, a bamboo structure was built to create a makeshift rain cover, since there was little to nothing in terms of reliable protection from summer rain. After completing the structure, it was (almost certainly intentionally) broken out of a mistrust of our intentions to show solidarity. And finally, the higher ups were absolutely certain that the KKK was going to come to the Wendy’s on the fourth of July and start

shooting people. Some participants had asked us if we would volunteer to infiltrate the KKK; we assured them that, if it were actually true they were coming, we would likely know about it. Alas, they didn't really hear us. As a result, on 4th of July they decided to call in support from NFAC (Not Fucking Around Coalition), a Black militia.

While paranoia stems from an inability to trust the good intentions of other (“outside”) actors, fatalism is caused by an inability to trust in a desirable outcome of the struggle overall. Simply put, by fatalism I mean the condition of fighting with a lot of determination but no hope. Keeping track of all the movements that come and go, one cannot help but get concerned hearing young people say “I'm ready to die for this shit.” It was the kind of things we heard often from the mouths of these young Black men, armed to the teeth and talking about defending a parking lot containing little more than a burned down building. Of course, in some respects the space is sacred, since it was the site of a police murder. On the other hand, the inability to detach from this sentiment is itself lethal. Fatalism is not a mistake on anyone's behalf. Rather, it seems more to be a condition of emergent revolts induced by a lack of clarity around the ultimate political horizon of revolutionary movements in general, and beyond that, the gloomy horizon of our species as a whole. If we are not merely fighting for negotiations (and I expect a large portion of the movement wants much more than this), and if there is no shared perception of what revolution means anymore, then it's also not clear what victory could look like aside from burning down police precincts. Nor am I saying that brazen militancy is something in need of strategic correction by more ‘rational’ revolutionary experts. Indeed, it almost seems as if it is precisely these sorts of strategic expectations inherited from the 20th century that cause dysphoria amongst more seasoned experts. However, the problem remains: without a shared sensibility around their ultimate revolutionary objectives, revolts risk adopting a strategy of exponential escalation which can lead only to repression or to burn out.

This fatalistic mindset is recognizable to anyone familiar with the problem of the warrior or the militant subject, both of whom undertake ever-increasing exploits with diminishing returns. Many frontliners faced this problem as well: they continued protest after protest after protest, never

satisfied with what they had achieved since it hadn't resulted in the burning of a police precinct or something like revolution. This not only opened them up to being targets of repression, but lent their activities a sense of desperation, meaning they don't know when it is time to disengage from street battles, which in turn makes them feel disappointed or jaded with the struggle. If we're unable to detach from a specific mode of conflict in a timely manner, we risk being trapped in symmetrical battles with the state which are largely reactive or vindictive. In his autobiography *Bad*, James Carr, a legendary outlaw and prison rebel known for his camaraderie with George Jackson, famously criticized the guerilla ideology that was a part of both prison organizing and Black radicalism in the early 60s: "I realized that as a militant I would always be at the mercy of arbitrary acts. The militants and the Tactical Squad [riot force] live symbiotically since the leftists speak in the language the goons can understand: the purely military resolution of power relations." He continued, "I saw that all the alternatives I'd set for myself were reactionary in that they were merely direct responses to crimes committed by the state. The terms, the terrain, and the weapons of my past struggle had all been dictated by my enemy. This had increased my rage, but also increased my willingness to enter into combat in such a way that I couldn't win."

Political action in our present will be characterized by paranoia and fatalism—and a revolutionary strategy must find a way beyond these limitations. Both paranoia and fatalism are born of a paradoxical situation of being incapable of finding meaningful action outside the current conflict *and* an inability to place faith in a collective process of empowerment. The essential question remains how to cut through the confusion caused by misinformation, by paranoia and fatalism and prevent the struggle from exhausting itself internally. On the one hand, partisans must actively combat the spread of misinformation by being the first to set up communications infrastructure that allows people to fact check information and discuss plans and ideas in a decentralized fashion. Beyond that, they must figure out meaningful ways to provide clarity around revolutionary goals that are immanent to the movement itself, which will help prevent people fighting in desperate battles they cannot win.

How are we to engage in conflicts where participants so easily lose

contact with the reality of the situation, yet are at the same time willing to throw their lives on the line for the same situations, all without the possibility of victory? The problem of fatalism goes back to the question of leadership: It has historically been the role of the party to intervene and lead proletarians out of desperate, dead-end struggles and onto a historical trajectory which would end in victory. But today, we cannot point to any group, party, organization, tendency or anything similar that would provide cohesion to the movement, even after the fact.

It's 4th of July. A block party is organized at the Wendy's. For the first time since the shooting on Juneteenth, the space is open. That means anyone is welcome to come. This was what we had been thinking needed to happen all along. Hundreds of people enter the space that hadn't been there before. There's old folks and children, people come to Wendy's that had been traveling all over the country to protests. There's tons of food, a DJ tent with people dancing, people drinking all day long, blunts are being passed around, it's the high point of the movement, everything comes together. A few activists set up some circus of a "political education training", luckily they were quickly moved to the back of the parking lot where nobody could hear or see them, since they couldn't have been more out of touch with the vibe if they had tried. Despite that, I'm glad that they were there. Above all we need a diverse number of groups to be at the space. Meanwhile, others painted murals on the other side of the building. Finally the space feels like an autonomous zone. There's different ideas of what people should be doing, nobody is dominating the space or disagreeing per se, and the diverse elements present become a source of strength rather than a source of confusion. This dynamic is what we refer to as the composition of the movement, and at this moment the zone is undefeatable.

Suddenly something changes. Unannounced, a group of about 200 people dressed in all Black and armed to the teeth shows up and marches through the Wendy's in a military-like formation. It's an all-Black militia. The gesture inspires awe in everyone present—now nobody would fuck with the space. But something strange happens. After posing for a picture in front of the building, the majority of them turn around and leave. These are specialists who—having never been to the space, quite literally qualified as outside agitators, even if they were Black. The mood changes. "A cloud swoops across the sky and blocks out the sun."

Four hours later, it's nighttime and I've never been this happy with the occu-

pation. The parking lot of a former fast-food restaurant opens up as a glimpse of paradise. We're eating food that someone cooked, waiting for fireworks to start going off, a little tired from blunts and the sun. I notice they start to block the streets off again, which they hadn't done since the cops stole their barricades 3 weeks earlier. It takes 3 dudes with long guns to block one lane of the road, since there's only a trash can as a barricade. I go home to change and get ready for the night, since there's a march in another part of the city later that evening. When I come back about an hour later I'm ready to get active. I drank a Gatorade and then I was ready for anything. I notice the same problem as earlier—they need actual barricades to block the road.

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When the bullets start flying I lose all sense of orientation. I grab my best friend and pulled her with me to the ground and behind a car, hold her close, and when the shootings stop for a moment we run low to the ground to the back of the parking lot. Someone opens up their car door for us and we hop in and get in and duck. We're not safe here. Blood curdling screams ring out, I see shots fired and returned. Someone is screaming "WHOEVER SHOT THAT BLACK MAN IS GOING TO DIE". We're looking for our people, trying to figure out where they went, uncertain if we should leave or stay. The same voice rings out "IFYOU DO NOT HAVE A RIFLE OR A SHOTGUN, LEAVE NOW. IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A RIFLE OR A SHOTGUN, LEAVE NOW." OK, it's clear. We try to figure out an exit. I remember that someone got kicked out of the Wendy's for cutting a hole in the fence into the neighboring lot, and this is how we make our exit. I don't know if the kid who cut the hole in that fence knew that his mischief would one day save lives, but that's exactly what happens in that moment. We make our way out into the neighboring lot, hop some fences, run home. It's 9 pm, there's a march starting soon. We have less than an hour to decompress and take it all in before we hit the streets again. We're still dizzy from what just happened, but the adrenaline keeps us going for an all night adventure. The next day we hear that a little girl named Secoria Turner had been shot in the crossfire of a dispute that had broken out at the blockades. I won't realize till weeks later how what happened that night had scarred me.

To have done with gunslingers

America is that strange land where boomers are quicker to shrug off cops getting shot than broken windows: the former presents a legitimate form of self-defense, and the latter is an attack on property. It is wishful thinking to believe that demonstrations in America will be gun-free in the future, and for this reason it is important to deliberate on how best to engage with them. The problem is a difficult one. If fatalism points to a strategic problem of escalation without a clear horizon, then guns are the tactical counterpart to this strategy in the American context.

While guns were present from the very first night at the Wendy's, right after Rayshard was killed, they became a prominent feature of the occupation after the shooting on Juneteenth. This first shooting had two notable consequences: white people were temporarily banned from the space, and people started stockpiling weapons in the Wendy's parking lot. Regardless of whether or not this was the right thing to do, it must be said that the right wing's strategy depends on polarizing tensions around precisely these two axes: the polarization of conflict along ethnic lines and the incitation of armed conflict.

Since the traffic blockades eventually led to an armed confrontation, can we locate any specific strategic function they might have played? On the days following Juneteenth, road blockades made out of burnt remnants of trash leftover from the arson were set up in the streets and reinforced by young men with long guns. The blockade wasn't just at any random street in the neighborhood—it was at the first intersection off the freeway off ramp. To put it bluntly, they blocked the entrance to the entire neighborhood. Cars of Black people who showed solidarity or gave a fist were allowed to pass, while white people mostly turned around far before approaching the blockades. Had it been held for long enough, such a blockade is the kind of thing that could provoke white flight from the area, forcing people to abandon their plans to "clean up the neighborhood."

While it was the power of stone throwers and arsonists who claimed the territory, it was doubtless the presence of these guns that kept the police away for three weeks. Leftists are often appalled when police take a hands-off approach to armed right-wing demonstrators who attempt to

blockade or occupy space, but the Wendy's showed that this could have more to do with the presence of guns than many leftists would like to believe. The visible display of guns made it so that the cops wouldn't dare to approach the place for fear of entering into a shoot-out. Given the low morale of the Atlanta Police Department—many officers had walked off the job that week over the charges filed against the killer cop—it was clear that they were overstretched and didn't have the forces to engage in this kind of gun battle. And yet, in an estimated total of seven shootouts that took place in three weeks, no fascists or cops got shot, and none of those killed were adversaries of the occupation.

What was the effect of guns at the occupation? Eventually, they became an *ersatz* for thinking about how to keep the space safe—and an *ersatz* for a strategy of collective power. As much as they contributed to keeping police away, they became a substitution for other types of activity that could have strengthened the occupation: having more people there instead of less, building actual physical barricades in the street instead of leaving it up to gunmen to stop cars, etc. The increase in guns contributed to a regimented, military vibe that dominated the camp. Thus instead of sleeping at night, the security team was tasked with ‘patrolling’ the space to look out for threats, a recipe for rapid burnout. There’s no doubt in my mind that the reason why more people didn’t come to the space is because they were afraid of the guns. It was not even just white people. Black neighbors who fuck around with guns all the time still wouldn’t come down, because they didn’t see the guns as anything particularly impressive; in their eyes, guns signaled something more like specialized gang activity that was dangerous for their kids to be around. So it didn’t have the same alluring effect that it did for many militants. In other words, the reliance on guns created a hostile environment that eventually ended up limiting the scope of actors engaged in the camp, which made it even more vulnerable to violence and attack.

The problem was not the presence of guns *per se*, but the fact that carrying a gun turned into a specialized role. This specialization was most visible in the arrival of the Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC) coalition on the 4th of July. Their alien presence, hardly more than a photo op,

took no account of the situation whatsoever, militarized the mood, and definitely didn't make anyone safer. While the militia was called into secure the space for fabricated threats of a KKK lynching on the 4th of July, their presence was just plain dominating, and created a situation that they were not actually there to take responsibility for. Even if they are Black, they present a pole of antagonism that escalates too quickly and falls into a trap of symmetrical warfare. The more armed actors become the leaders of the struggle, the less room to maneuver will be left to people throwing Molotovs, breaking into buildings to hack electricity, or cutting fences to steal equipment.

The idea that the best way to respond to gun violence by the state is by more armed violence is a fallacy with a history. A similar debate played out in the 60s between Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton: while the former advocated for an armed vanguard of lumpenproles to lead the struggle, Newton came to see the isolating effects brazen militancy had on the struggle and thus pursued survival programs instead. A more community-centered approach at the Wendy's may have created the space for real autonomous material power to grow, and broadening the scope of actors may have made the space less vulnerable to armed attack, reducing the number of guns necessary.

The guns at the Wendy's were not going to magically make a Peace Center appear. Aside from replacing any real strategy, guns did not help the Wendy's leadership get any closer to their real goal, and in the end, they were still reliant on negotiations with the state to get what they wanted. At the same time, it is clear that there would have been no way to launch a critique of the guns from an unarmed position. Any plea for nonviolence would have been laughed at and brushed aside. In hindsight, if we would have wanted to make the space safer and more hospitable, we would have had to take over roles on the security team and neutralize the increasing militarization from within that role—a self-abolition of the armed partisan, if something like that is conceivable.

The question of violence will be a decisive one for the future of revolutionary movements in America. There's no doubt that said movements will need to arm themselves for self-defense. Yet as also happened in the CHAZ in Seattle, the violence within the police-free zones often directly

results in them losing political support. When this is the case, the police do not even need to bother pursuing a strategy of direct repression. Instead they can just wait until their absence from the area allows enough violence to happen that eventually makes their presence again seem justified. In contrast to this strategy that is composed of minoritarian factions of armed shooters, the legacy of the non-violent direct action movement provides something that is able to maintain broad support. To point this out is not to make a case for moralistic non-violence, but rather to suggest that the strength of our movements will depend on broad social support more than on purely military victories.

Conclusion

The main problems at Wendy's were that the space was controlled by a hierarchical leadership who—by their own account—“privatized” the protest, to the point of refusing any help from several dozens of people who were interested in contributing to the space in real ways. These factors made the space increasingly isolated, and the leaders increasingly paranoid. As a result, the occupation relied on a dangerous strategy of armed escalation to强arm the state, which ended predictably with gun violence that made the space easily repressible and, quite frankly, difficult to defend, after an 8-year-old was murdered in the crossfire of a shootout on the 4th of July. While the occupation galvanized an overwhelming display of militancy and courage, it ended with a similar dilemma as many of the other rebellions across the country: it was unable to clarify what there was to build or affirm, once the looting, burning and destruction had ended.

What does the Wendy's tell us about a strategy of escalation? What are we to think of the fact that guns both made the occupation possible and led to its demise? If it has been our task in past struggles to escalate things to their insurrectionary horizon, this must be differentiated from escalation as the mere increase of a capacity for violence. Kenosha is yet another situation in which violence quickly escalated past a point in which emancipatory actors were able to be effective. In these situations, the accelerated rate of escalation is unsustainable and, in the end, only accelerates the restoration of law and order. Revolutionary activity should be measured

in terms of its capacity to be sustainably defended by as many people as possible. When revolutionary violence tends to isolate participants rather than defending them, it does more harm than good.

Beyond the question of violence, the question emerges as to how to create a common perspective on what forms of action are possible in the absence of leadership structures or democratic proceduralism. As movements like the George Floyd rebellion continue to appear, “organized militants” might find themselves being outpaced and sidelined by proletarians who have little interest or regard for long-term revolutionary or strategic objectives, and instead are magnetized exclusively to looting and clashing with police. If we wish to avoid an easily foreseeable outcome, it is important to clarify a measurable set of revolutionary objectives beyond that of fighting increasingly militarized battles with the state and fascists, or becoming depressed or jaded when these dry up or are no longer possible. Without any goals in mind, the escalation of violence risks outpacing the capacity of movements to produce collective affirmations beyond that of the enemies they hold in common. How do we counter this escalation, while still advancing along a revolutionary trajectory?

Insurrections and uprisings are one important piece of a protracted revolutionary process, not necessarily their apocalyptic culmination. All movements, being in their essence living organisms, are bound to die out. However much we might wish to disavow this inevitable ending of our movements, those frameworks that allow a sense of joy and celebration to accompany the end of movements are better positioned to foster the growth of a sustainable long-term revolutionary force. It requires an enormous amount of energy to weather the negative fallout of such big ruptures, and to avoid a sense of desperation that compels us to engage in actions that merely mimic the feelings evoked during the movement (the joy of destruction, now undertaken on an individual basis without a mass of people), but which do not contain the potential to meaningfully open up new paths of struggle. To avoid fatalistic actions, we must cultivate the capacity to throw everything into these revolts, to give these battles our all, while at the same time recognizing when their potential is exhausted, or when movements are ‘dead’. This capacity to recognize when the terrain is no longer one that we are determining is an essential part of what it means

to ‘be water.’

As the recent debates around the desirability of civil war make clear, there is no meaningful concept of revolution on offer today.² In the 20th century, proletarian revolution was imagined as a process whereby the working class would grow exponentially up to a critical threshold, at which point it would become politically hegemonic, take power, and produce a new world from out of the shell of the old. Today, this is no longer conceivable: we are collapsing under the shell of the old world, rather than finding meaningful ways to salvage it. Consequently, today’s partisans will have to be much more flexible in their expectations about what is desirable and possible in the coming years.

Beyond the internal strife our species is facing, we face the threat of extinction under a planetary catastrophe of unthinkable proportions. This calls on us to think, as Günther Anders phrased it, an “apocalypse that consists of mere downfall, which doesn’t represent the opening of a new, positive state of affairs”—an “apocalypse without kingdom.” Fortunately, we’re not the only ones faced with the difficulty of founding a new way of life. In the time to come, ruling elites will also find it increasingly challenging to establish and maintain law and order. As the horizon of governance recedes, more and more space will open up for us, allowing us to experiment with ever-larger regions of territory outside of their control. The Wendy’s gave us a very real glimpse of precisely this coming disarray. Our task now is to turn the challenges it faced into a touchstone to guide us through the coming abyss.

Notes

1. The story of Natalie White is more sinister than often reported. Missing from the account that she was Rayshard's girlfriend is the fact that Rayshard was also married. The story after that is well known, that Natalie was hunted down after videos circulated on social media of a white woman allegedly setting fire to the building. But the Atlanta Police Department didn't move to arrest her until after the funeral, which she wasn't present at. After the family went through its grieving process together, the state then moved in to take out the 'extramarital' partner, further isolating her from Rayshard's Black family. The majority Black APD could thus attempt to align itself with Rayshard's family on the basis of Black identity, while attempting to isolate Natalie White from the family, in a bid to get the family to disidentify with the revolt that unfolded after Rayshard's killing.

2. For two takes with seemingly entirely different understandings of civil war and conclusions about its desirability, see Idris Robinson, "Letter to Michael Reinoehl," and CrimethInc., "Between Electoral Politics and Civil War."

The following article analyzes the events that took place between June 12th to July 14th at the occupation of a Wendy's in Atlanta, the site of Rayshard Brooks' murder by the Atlanta Police Department. Over the course of this month, a strange in-between world formed around the burned intestines of a fast food restaurant. In it, we saw one of the most militant examples of Black struggle in the country. The exemplary character of the struggle at the Wendy's allowed the authors to experience some of the most powerful interventions—and some of the most dangerous limitations—that American rebellion confronts today. In what follows, the authors focus on three dimensions of this conflict: the effect of Black (militant) leadership, fatalism and paranoia as constitutive conditions of the event, and the function of guns and lethal force in unfolding conflict.